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U.S. Department of State

Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

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AFGHANISTAN*

* The American Embassy in Kabul has been closed for security reasons since January, 1989. Information on the human rights situation is therefore limited.

Afghanistan in 1996 continued to experience civil war and political instability, although more of the country was free of fighting and violence than in past years. There was no central government. At year's end, the Pashtun-dominated ultra-conservative Islamic movement known as the Taliban had captured the capital of Kabul and expanded its control to over two-thirds of the country. General Abdul Rashid Dostam, an ethnic Uzbek, controlled several north-central provinces. After the loss of Kabul, former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander, Ahmed Shah Masood, controlled only three northeastern provinces. Rabbani and Dostam formed an alliance to check the growing power of the Taliban.

Taliban forces took Kabul on September 26-27 after Masood's forces retreated northward. The Taliban gained some ground north of Kabul, but were pushed back by the combined forces of Masood and Dostam. The year ended in a military stalemate. Despite intensive efforts, United Nations Special Envoy Norbert Holl did not secure a cease-fire agreement but made some progress towards getting the factions to begin political talks. The fighting forced thousands of Afghans to flee their homes in Kabul, areas north of Kabul, and in the northwestern and eastern parts of the country.

There is no constitution, rule of law, or independent judiciary. Former President Rabbani, relocated to

Takhar in the north, claimed that he remained the head of the Government of Afghanistan. His delegation retained Afghanistan's U.N. seat after the U.N. General Assembly deferred a decision on Afghanistan's credentials. The Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, formed a six-member ruling council in Kabul which ruled by edict. Ultimate authority for Taliban rule rested in the Taliban's inner Shura (Council), located in the southern city of Kandahar, and in Mullah Omar. In Taliban areas, order was established by disarming the local commanders and the populace and by instituting stiff punishments for crimes. Several provincial administrations maintained limited functions. Civil institutions were mostly nonexistent. General Dostam has established some administration in the 5-6 north-central provinces under his control, including customs collection at border points, but law and order in these areas is enforced by local commanders. The ethnic Tajik-majority areas of the northeast were controlled by Masood's commanders and his political organization.

Agriculture, including high levels of opium poppy cultivation, remained the mainstay of the economy. Afghanistan has become the second largest opium producer in the world. Lack of resources and the war have impeded reconstruction of irrigation systems, repair of market roads, and replanting of orchards in some areas. The presence of an estimated 10 million land mines has restricted areas for cultivation and slowed the return of refugees who are needed to rebuild the economy. The laying of new mine fields, primarily by pro-Rabbani forces but also by General Dostam's forces, exacerbated an already difficult situation. Trade was mainly in fruits, minerals, and gems, as well as goods smuggled to Pakistan. Formal economic activity remained minimal and was inhibited by recurrent fighting and roads blocked by local commanders. These blockages were removed in territory taken by the Taliban. Reconstruction was continuing in Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad, although efforts in the latter city were slowed by renewed hostilities in the fall. Reconstruction in some northern areas, including Balkh province, reportedly continues.

Serious human rights violations continued to occur and citizens were precluded from changing their government peacefully. Political killings, torture, rape, arbitrary detention, looting, abductions and kidnappings for ransom were committed by armed units, local commanders, and rogue individuals. Prison conditions were poor. Various factions infringed on citizens' privacy rights. Summary justice was common. The Taliban instituted Islamic courts and enforced their interpretation of appropriate Islamic punishments, such as public executions and amputations of one hand and one foot for theft. For minor infractions, Taliban militiamen often decided right or wrong and meted out punishments such as beatings on the spot. Both Taliban and anti-Taliban forces were responsible for the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas, particularly Kabul. Taliban forces rocketed and shelled Kabul when it was held by Rabbani, killing hundreds of civilians. After Kabul fell, Dostam and Masood's forces also bombed the city, but caused many fewer casualties. Civil war conditions and the unfettered actions of competing factions effectively limited the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, and movement. There was widespread discrimination against women and girls, and the condition of women and girls in Kabul and Herat after the Taliban captured these cities was significantly worse than in 1995. The Taliban prohibited women from working outside the home except in the health care field. Girls were prohibited from attending school. However, the imposition of Taliban control in rural areas resulted in reduced incidents of rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage. Worker rights were not defined.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

A number of personal and politically-motivated killings reportedly took place during the chaos when the Taliban took Jalalabad in mid-September. For example, a group of commanders and members of the

Nangarhar Council were ambushed and killed near the border town of Torkham. The attack was presumed to be retaliation for a Council-sanctioned killing of the assailant's brother several years earlier. When the Taliban captured Kabul in late September, one of their first acts was to invade the U.N. compound, seize former President Najibullah and his brother, and summarily execute them. Najibullah was head of the secret police during the Soviet occupation and President of Afghanistan from 1986-92. The corpses were hung in the street for 2 days following the executions. According to Amnesty International, at least 30 men were taken from Herat prison in July and executed by Taliban authorities. In October there were unconfirmed reports that 20 civilians were executed by Taliban forces north of Kabul as the Taliban forces withdrew under pressure from Masood's forces. There were also reports of atrocities against civilians by Dostam's forces.

Commander Rasul Pahlawan, a prominent northern leader, was killed in June, reportedly by one of his bodyguards who then was killed by the other bodyguards. Dostam, who many thought ordered the killing, denied involvement and established a commission of inquiry into the slaying. The assassin's family reportedly had had land and political disputes with Pahlawan. Since Pahlawan's slaying, intra-factional fighting within Dostam's political organization reportedly has resulted in some deaths.

In other areas, combatants sought to kill rival commanders and their sympathizers. The perpetrators of these killings and their motives were difficult to identify, as political motives are often entwined with family and tribal feuds, battles over the drug trade, and personal vendettas. In March fighting broke out in Baghlan near the town of Pul-i-Khumri after Ismaili forces reportedly ambushed and killed a Hezb-i-Islami commander loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and some of his men.

The Taliban used swift summary trials and implemented strict punishments according to Islamic law; the Taliban ordered public executions and death by stoning (see Sections 1.c. and 1.e.)

b. Disappearance

Abductions, kidnappings, or hostage-taking for ransom or political reasons occurred in non-Taliban areas, but specific information was lacking. An unconfirmed report claimed that in July, political associates of Ahmed Shah Masood kidnaped six individuals in Takhar who were accused of being political opponents of Masood and held them for ransom. The strict security enforced by the Taliban in areas under their control has resulted in a decrease in such crimes.

There were unconfirmed reports of girls and young women being kidnaped by local commanders in the southeast, Jalalabad, Kabul, and other areas before these areas came under Taliban control. Some of the women were then forced to marry their kidnapers. Others simply remained missing. To avoid this situation, some families sent their daughters to Pakistan. There were also reports that women had been killed by their male relatives to prevent forced marriages (see Section 5).

Groups in Russia listed nearly 300 former Soviet soldiers who had served in Afghanistan as missing in action or prisoners of war. Most were thought to be dead or to have voluntarily assimilated into Afghan society. Some allegedly continued to be held against their will by their Afghan captors. A number of persons from Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakstan remain missing from the period of the Soviet occupation and are presumed dead. Their remains have not been found.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Afghanistan is in a state of civil war and torture is used against opponents and prisoners of war (POW's), though specific information is generally lacking. Torture does not appear to be a routine practice in most

areas. Some of Masood's commanders in the north reportedly used torture routinely to extract information from and break the will of prisoners and political opponents; some of the victims were said to have been tortured to death. Local authorities maintain prisons in territories under their control and established torture cells in some of them. The Taliban freed many prisoners as they took control of new areas, but also incarcerated new prisoners. The Taliban operate prisons in Kandahar, Herat, Kabul, and Jalalabad. There are also prisons in the north in Mazar-i-Sharif and Faizabad, Badakhshan province. According to Amnesty International (AI), some Taliban prisoners have been forced to labor in life-threatening conditions such as digging trenches in mined areas, though these reports are unconfirmed.

The Taliban ruled strictly in areas they controlled, establishing ad hoc and rudimentary judicial systems. Taliban courts imposed their interpretation of Islamic laws and punishments following swift summary trials. Murderers were subjected to public executions (see Section 1.a.) and thieves

had a limb or two (one hand, one foot) severed. Adulterers were stoned to death. In July a couple was convicted of adultery by a Taliban court. The couple was reportedly stoned to death in a public place in Kandahar. In August a man was hanged from a crane for murder and left dangling for 20 minutes. The body was reportedly taken to the hospital before burial. However, the hospital staff discovered that the man was still alive. The Taliban reportedly pardoned the man who is now venerated.

Prison conditions are poor. Prisoners are given no food. Normally, this is the responsibility of prisoners' relatives who are allowed to visit to provide them with food once or twice a week. Those who have no relatives have to petition the local council or rely on other inmates. Prisoners live in collective cells. The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan visited prisoners in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar in July. Local authorities allowed the ICRC to visit detainees throughout the country.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

With the absence of formal legal and law enforcement institutions, justice was not administered according to formal legal codes. Judicial and police procedures varied from locality to locality. Little is known about the procedures for taking persons into custody and bringing them to justice. In both Taliban and non-Taliban areas, the practices varied depending on the locality, the local commanders, and other authorities. Some areas have more of a judicial structure than others. A seven-member Russian air crew, detained by the Taliban in Kandahar since August 1995, managed to escape in August. While performing maintenance on their downed aircraft at the airport, the crewmen overpowered their guards and took off in their plane to freedom.

Between January and June, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited over 2,000 detainees in 38 places of detention. Following the Taliban's capture of Kabul in September, the ICRC confirmed that all the detainees it had previously visited in the capital had been released. There were unconfirmed reports that the Taliban had freed prisoners in the southeast and the east as they captured these areas in August and September. In early October, the ICRC began visits to detainees newly-arrested by the Taliban in Kabul and Jalalabad.

In October AI claimed that the Taliban had detained up to 1,000 civilians during house to house in the initial days after the fall of Kabul. The families feared that the prisoners were sent to clear mine fields for the Taliban in the Panjshir valley. This report was not confirmed. AI reported other cases of individuals detained by the Taliban because of

their ethnic origin, suspected sympathy with Taliban opponents, or opposition to Taliban religious decrees.

Political detainees are probably held by all factions but no firm numbers are available. Perhaps as many as 1,000 soldiers are held by opposing groups as POW's. In November the ICRC reported that 600 former Rabbani/Masood soldiers were held by the Taliban. Masood reportedly holds several hundred Taliban soldiers as POWs.

The authorities are not known to use forced exile.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

With no functioning nationwide judicial system, many municipal and provincial authorities relied on some form of Shari'a (Islamic) law and traditional tribal codes of justice.

Little is known about the administration of justice in the areas controlled by Dostam and Rabbani/Masood in the northern provinces. The administration and implementation of justice could vary from area to area and depend on the whims of local commanders or other authorities, who could summarily execute, torture, and mete out punishments without reference to any other authority. In Rabbani/Masood-controlled Badakhshan province, one commander used a scaffold outside his headquarters to hang several individuals convicted of serious crimes by local Islamic courts. In March three alleged criminals were hanged in public in Kabul, then under Rabbani's control.

The Taliban established Islamic courts in areas under their control to judge criminal cases and resolve disputes. These courts meted out punishments to dozens of prisoners, including execution and amputation. These courts are said to have heard cases in sessions that lasted only a few minutes. Reportedly one such court in Kandahar usually consisted of four judges who gathered in a room or courtyard. Both the witnesses and the accused were brought before the judges to recount testimony and plead their cases. Prisoners were often brought forward in shackles. The court reportedly dealt with all complaints, relying on Islamic law and punishments as well as traditional tribal customs (see Section 1.c.). In cases involving murder, convicted prisoners were generally ordered executed by relatives of the victim (see Section 1.a.), who could choose to accept other restitution. Decisions of the courts were reportedly final.

In January, according to press reports, a man was executed in Logar province for murdering a neighbor during a dispute. Local Taliban authorities arrested and tried the man, who was executed by a firing squad led by the victim's brother after the victim's family refused to forgive the man or accept money

as compensation. Also in January, a man in Herat, also controlled by the Taliban, was executed by hanging at a local sports arena, reportedly for murder.

In February according to press reports, a Taliban court in Khost tried and convicted two men of murder in separate crimes. After rejecting any offer of money as compensation, the victims' male relatives carried out the sentence with a Kalashnikov rifle. The convicted men were blindfolded with hands and feet tied, placed one at a time in front of a large tree in a public area, and executed.

In July the Taliban allegedly executed without trial 30 to

50 pro-Rabbani troops or supporters captured by the Taliban in Herat and Ghor provinces. In the western province of Nimruz, three men were publicly hanged in August by the Taliban after having been found guilty of planting landmines. In November, according to press reports, two men were executed in Kandahar by order of an Islamic court for sexually assaulting and murdering a boy and a girl. In December, a man convicted of killing a woman and children by Rabbani's courts in Kabul and who

escaped from prison in the confusion following the Taliban takeover, was recaptured by the Taliban. A Taliban Islamic court affirmed the earlier conviction and allowed the husband of the murdered woman to forgive the murderer or kill the murderer himself. He chose the latter and shot the murderer to death in Kabul stadium.

Shi'a Islamic legal norms are reportedly imposed in the Hazarajat in central Afghanistan. According to the October report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan (see Section 4), the Shi'a Unity Party (Hezb-i-Wahdat) in Bamian province has established a Judicial Committee. The Committee has a prosecutor's office composed of three branches for political, military, and social offenders. There were also courts of the first and the final instance.

All factions probably hold political prisoners but no firm estimates of numbers are available.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Intrafactional fighting often resulted in the homes and businesses of civilians being invaded and looted by the opposing forces--whether victor or loser. Armed gunmen acted with impunity given the absence of any legal protection from the law or a responsive police force. In Kabul and Jalalabad prior to the Taliban takeover, armed individuals reportedly forced their way into homes without fear of reprisal. It was unclear what authority controlled the actions of Taliban militiamen who patrolled the streets of cities and towns, and several incidents were reported of Taliban soldiers entering

private homes without prior notification or informed consent in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and elsewhere. In Kabul the soldiers allegedly searched homes for evidence of cooperation with the former authorities. Individuals were beaten on the streets by the Taliban for what were deemed infractions of Taliban rules. However, following a written order in December by Mullah Omar to Taliban followers warning against beating citizens, the practice diminished.

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 300 single men were registered in October who claimed to be fleeing forced conscription by the Taliban. There were unconfirmed reports that after the takeover of Kabul, the Taliban rounded up young men to be soldiers and Panshiri Tajiks were seized in Kabul and taken to undisclosed locations.

The Taliban and Dostam's political organizations infringed on women's freedom of expression by requiring strict Islamic garb in public (see Section 5).

g. Use of Excessive Force and Violations of Humanitarian Law in Internal Conflicts

The Taliban killed approximately 325 civilians in Kabul in 1996 by indiscriminately firing rockets into the city. Approximately 675 civilians in Kabul were injured during the year because of the civil war. The Taliban reportedly conducted aerial bombing raids in October around Kalakan, approximately 12 miles north of Kabul, and caused the deaths of 16 to 20 civilians, including women and children. According to press reports, in October Taliban units destroyed 120 houses in the Tajik-dominated village of Sar Cheshma, five miles north of Kabul. From October to December, Dostam's and Masood's forces engaged in sporadic bombing and rocket attacks against Kabul. Several persons, including children, were killed and injured in separate attacks.

At the beginning of the year, the UNHCR reported that there were approximately 150,000 internally displaced persons (IDP's) in camps near Jalalabad and as many as 200,000 living independently in and around Jalalabad city. Between 25,000 and 27,000 IDP's were reported to be living in camps in the north

in Pul-i-Khumri, Mazar-i-Sharif, Shibergan, and Hairatan. In November thousands of persons fled fighting in the northwest province of Badghiz. Twelve hundred of these IDP's passed through UNHCR camps in the Herat area, and 700 remained in camps as of late December. Some 6,000 to 7,000 had headed north into Turkmenistan, but many of those had returned. The UNHCR said that 15,000 Afghans, mostly from Kabul, had crossed into Pakistan since October and that 600 to 700 were arriving daily. From October to December, UNHCR estimated that about 40,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan due to the intensified civil war.

The Afghan countryside remains plagued by an estimated

10 million land mines sown during and since the Soviet occupation. With funding from international donors, the United Nations has organized and trained mine detection and clearance teams, which operated throughout Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the mines are expected to pose a threat for years to come. The laying of new mine fields by Masood forces around Kabul and Sarobi, a strategic city southeast of Kabul, posed new dangers. U.N. agencies and other nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) have instituted a number of mine awareness campaigns and educational programs for women and children in various parts of the country, but many were curtailed as a result of Taliban restrictions on women and girls.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

There are no laws effectively providing for freedom of speech and the press, and the Kabul authorities under Rabbani for the first 9 months of the year lacked the authority to protect these rights. Senior officials of various warring factions allegedly attempted to intimidate reporters and influence their reporting. The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) is an unaffiliated reporting service. The few newspapers, all of which were published only sporadically, were largely affiliated with different factions. There was a pro-Rabbani radio and television service in Kabul until it came under Taliban control and was renamed the Voice of Shariat. The various regions had their own radio and television stations: Dostam had his own in the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif and Hekmatyar had his own near Kabul until they were taken over by the Taliban. Herat's media came under Taliban control when they captured the city in September 1995.

International journalists in Kabul reported that they were routinely pressured by the Rabbani regime to slant their coverage. The Taliban by and large cooperated with the international press who arrived in Kabul in September and took few steps to curb their access. However, a female Western journalist was not allowed to attend the Taliban's first press conference in Kabul. In another incident, one commander discouraged Taliban officials from responding to questions posed by Western female journalists. One female correspondent reported that she and her camera crew were jostled by Taliban soldiers while filming in Kabul. There were several incidents in which photographers' film was seized after taking pictures of women. In October two Argentine journalists were reportedly detained for 24 hours and beaten by Taliban militia after they attempted to interview two Afghan women in Kabul. At times Western journalists were prevented from traveling to the front lines, although many succeeded in doing so on other occasions.

Despite some incidents most journalists, including women, were able to do their jobs. In November the Taliban imposed a rule requiring journalists to stay at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul (allegedly for security and economic reasons). Journalists also reported at year's end that the Taliban were attempting to control who could act as drivers and interpreters for journalists.

The Taliban imposed its interpretation of Islam on popular culture, banning music, movies, and television. Cinemas in Kabul had already been closed by authorities in June before the Taliban takeover.

The Taliban severely restricts academic freedom, particularly education for girls (see Section 5).

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Civil war, tenuous security, and likely opposition from local authorities seriously inhibited freedom of assembly and association. Nonetheless, Afghans demonstrated in several cities. There were credible reports of women demonstrating in Herat against Taliban strictures, of persons encouraged by the Taliban to demonstrate in Kabul and Kandahar against Iranian interference, and of demonstrations in Mazar-i-Sharif against the Taliban. In one demonstration in Herat, Taliban adherents reportedly beat the female demonstrators.

There were reports of Taliban harassment of international aid agencies and NGOs. In the fall, the Taliban detained Afghan staffers of UNHCR, broke into the office and home of one international staffer, and confiscated vehicles. Other NGO staffers, mostly Afghan, were also detained. Some female Afghan staffers were threatened with punishment if they went to work.

It is unknown whether laws exist governing the formation of associations. The Taliban reportedly issued an edict at year's end which outlawed all social organizations, but this was unconfirmed. Many Afghan NGOs have been formed. Some are based in neighboring countries, mostly Pakistan, with branches inside Afghanistan. Others are based in Afghan cities. The focus of their activities is primarily humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation, health, education, and agriculture.

c. Freedom of Religion

Afghanistan's official name, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, reflects the country's adherence to Islam as the state religion. Some 85 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, with Shi'a Muslims comprising most of the remainder. The Hazara ethnic group is Shi'a; Shi'as are among the most economically disadvantaged people in Afghanistan. The Shi'a

minority want a national government to give them equal rights as citizens. There were unconfirmed reports that under Taliban rule, the Shi'a populations in Kabul and Herat were forced to pray in the open-handed Sunni style, rather than in their own closed-handed style. Miniature stones, representing the sacred black stone at the Kaaba in Mecca, were removed from Shi'a mosques. Shi'as were forced to pray at the same time as Sunnis, although traditionally their prayer schedules differ. However, at year's end it appeared the Taliban were not interfering in Shi'a prayer practices.

The Taliban sought to impose their strict form of Islamic observance in areas that they control. Men were hauled out of their vehicles and forced to attend services at mosques. Taliban members attempted to force men to pray five times a day at set times and to grow long beards. Ismaili women were not allowed to leave home to attend Ismaili religious services and Ismaili girls were not allowed to attend school. The Taliban also ordered women to dress in strict Islamic garb (see Section 5).

The small number of non-Muslim residents in Afghanistan may practice their faith, but may not proselytize. The country's small Hindu and Sikh population, which once numbered about 50,000, continued to shrink as its members emigrated or took refuge abroad. Some Taliban leaders claimed tolerance of religious minorities. There were unconfirmed reports that a number of Sikhs, who have long felt unwelcome by the various mujaheddin commanders, had returned to Jalalabad, Ghazni, and Kabul

under the Taliban to reclaim their property and resume residence.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

Although in principle citizens have the right to travel freely both inside and outside the country, their ability to travel within the country was hampered by warfare, brigandage, millions of land mines, a road network in a state of disrepair, and limited domestic air service, complicated by factional threats to air traffic. Despite these obstacles many people continued to travel relatively freely with buses plying routes in most parts of the country. Security conditions have improved along roads in Taliban-controlled areas. However, due to intermittent fighting in various areas, international aid agencies often found that their ability to travel, work, and distribute assistance was hampered. International travel continued to be difficult as both Dostam and the Taliban threatened to shoot down any planes that overflew areas of the country that they controlled without their permission. In December, the Taliban forced down a U.N. plane carrying a Tajik opposition leader from Iran to Afghanistan. The Taliban said the U.N. had not informed them of the flight. After a diversion to Kandahar, the plane was allowed to proceed.

Commercial trade was impeded in certain non-Taliban areas as local commanders continued to demonstrate their control over the roads by demanding road tolls and sometimes closing roads. In January one road stoppage at Sarobi on the Kabul-Jalalabad road by a Hekmatyar commander prevented trucks carrying food supplies from reaching Kabul for about a week. Roads leading to Bamian province reportedly contained dozens of checkpoints controlled by local commanders, where travelers were sometimes subject to extortion.

According to the UNHCR, approximately 10,000 people reportedly fled Jalalabad following the Taliban takeover in mid-September, but most later returned. Villagers were forced to flee the fighting north and northeast of Kabul in several locations as factions contended for control village by village. A large number of Kabul inhabitants were also displaced by the Taliban takeover in late September, but there were no reliable estimates as to their number. In November fighting in Badghis province in the northwest caused thousands to flee their homes. More than 9,000 displaced persons were concentrated in 3 areas of northern Afghanistan by mid-November. The UNHCR said that 15,000 Afghans, mostly from Kabul, had crossed the border to Pakistan since the beginning of October. While, according to UNHCR statistics, the overall number of families returning to Kabul was greater than the number departing in 1996, the number of departing families rose sharply in September and continued at a high level throughout the remainder of the year. The rate of arrival in Pakistan in October was 600 to 700 a day. By year's end, the UNHCR and NGO's were assisting more than 1,600 newly arrived families (11,200 persons) in Nasir Bagh camp in Pakistan. Since October the Taliban have reportedly removed dozens of checkpoints on the Kabul-Jalalabad road; at year's end there were only six. They routinely checked passengers for weapons and "stolen state property."

Afghans continued to form one of the world's largest refugee populations. According to the UNHCR, about 2.4 million Afghans remain outside the country in 1996 as registered refugees. Of these, 1.3 million are in Iran, 864,000 are in Pakistan, and 28,000 are in Russia. Approximately 19,000 Afghans reside in parts of the former Soviet Union other than Russia. Pakistan claimed an additional 500,000 unregistered Afghan refugees in its territory. Over 3.8 million Afghan refugees have been repatriated since 1988, with over 1.5 million returning to Afghanistan in the peak year of 1992. According to the UNHCR, 127,500 Afghans repatriated in 1996, 120,000 from Pakistan and 7,500 from Iran. The repatriation from Iran was much lower than in previous years. This reflected in part the Iranian Government's decision not to encourage r